

CITIZEN AIRMAN

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Home at Last

Pilot laid to rest 37 years after his death

By Master Sgt. Bud McKay

It weighs only a few ounces, but for almost 40 years Tommy Holmes' MIA bracelet has been like an anchor. He wore the silver bracelet, inscribed with the name of his father, Col. Lester E. Holmes, every day since he was reported missing in action May 22, 1967.

Along with his two older brothers, Bruce and Senior Master Sgt. Roger Holmes, Tommy was finally able to remove the anchor from his wrist — 37 years to the day Colonel Holmes was shot down over North Vietnam. They placed their bracelets next to their father's coffin at a funeral May 22 in Nashua, Iowa.

"I've gone through a couple of them," said Tommy, the youngest of Colonel Holmes' three sons, as he touched the silver MIA bracelet he wore on his right wrist before the funeral. "At times, it's been a shackle in my life. For the last 37 years, my dad was never dead to me — he was missing. After the funeral, I'll never wear this particular bracelet again: I'll put it in my dad's coffin. But once I put that one away, I will wear another one with another name on it. The (MIA) issue is that important to me."

Colonel Holmes' father and mother, Lagrand and Chloe Holmes, of Plainfield, Iowa, and his wife, Norma Jean Holmes, died before ever learning what happened to him. The colonel was laid to rest next to his wife, who passed away in 1986.

Colonel Holmes was last in Iowa in 1966. That's when he took his wife and three sons to his hometown of Plainfield to show them the dream house he planned to buy in preparation for his retirement from the Air Force in 1968. The house had plenty of land for the highly decorated aviator to construct a small runway out back. It also had an area where he planned to locate a gun shop.

His passion for guns landed him on the all-Air Force pistol team. In one competition, he and his teammates went up against the all-Marine Corps pistol team at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. Shooting against him was his son, Bruce, who just a few years before was sworn into the Marines. The elder Holmes won four of the five matches against his son that day, and the Air Force won the overall competition. However, he was most



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“When the staff cars showed up, we knew something bad happened — there’s never any good news when they show up. We were told that he may have been captured or killed. They didn’t know. The chaplain who showed up said, ‘Let’s pray he jumped out with his parachute.’ Dad wouldn’t wear a parachute; we all knew that. Mom sure as hell knew that. She got very angry and told the chaplain, ‘He didn’t wear a damn parachute. Don’t sit here and speculate on what you think may have happened. Give me the facts of what happened.’”

Tommy Holmes

proud of Bruce’s sole victory.

Colonel Holmes’ skill as an aviator earned him aircraft commander opportunities in many major events, including flying the lead jet in Jimmy Stewart’s movie “Strategic Air Command” as well as flying Bob Hope around during the Berlin Airlift to entertain the troops. He looked at the chance of flying the smaller O-1E “Bird Dog” as a forward air controller in Vietnam as a dream assignment.

His dream job turned into a nightmare when Colonel Holmes was shot down May 22, 1967.

“Mom always dreaded to see a staff car drive up in the driveway,” said Sergeant Holmes, first sergeant for the 36th Aerial Port Squadron, part of Air Force Reserve Command’s 446th Airlift Wing, McChord AFB, Wash. “That’s exactly what happened to us, only there were two staff cars: the wing commander and chaplain. Dad was shot down on May 22. We were notified on May 23. I graduated from high school on May 24.”

When the Air Force officials showed up to notify the Holmes family, Bruce was serving as a Marine, and Sergeant Holmes was away visiting a nearby friend. Only Tommy was home with his mom when the staff cars pulled into their driveway.

“When the staff cars showed up, we knew something bad happened — there’s never any good news when they show up,” Tommy said. “We were told that he may have been captured or killed. They didn’t know. The chaplain who showed up said, ‘Let’s pray he jumped out with his parachute.’ Dad wouldn’t wear a parachute; we all knew that. Mom sure as hell knew that. She got very angry and told the chaplain, ‘He didn’t wear a damn parachute. Don’t sit here and speculate on what you think may have happened. Give me the facts of what happened.’”

But facts were scarce. The pilot of an O-1E flying about a mile ahead of the colonel’s aircraft heard an explosion. He turned around and saw that Colonel Holmes’ plane had been hit. One wing was gone, and the plane was spiraling toward the ground. The other Bird Dog pilot never saw Colonel Holmes’ plane hit the ground because he began to take ground fire and had to take evasive action. For 30 minutes he circled the area where he thought Colonel Holmes may have gone down, but he never saw any evidence of a crash site.

Because of heavy concentrations of North Vietnamese forces in the area, which was just a few miles south of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, no rescue mission was possible, according to a Department of Defense report. It would be more than 20 years before the department received any leads into what happened to Colonel Holmes.

“There were so many different reports on what happened or what didn’t happen,” Sergeant Holmes said. “The Air Force would even bring over pictures it got from various POW camps to see if my mom could identify anyone as my dad. This was three or four years after he was shot down. My mom actually thought she did recognize his nose in one of the photos.”

All of the reports gave her and her sons hope, as well as fear, that Colonel Holmes was still alive.

“For the first 10 years, I held out hope that he was captured, although we knew he wouldn’t have been the same man,” Bruce said. “We couldn’t bare the thought of him

being tortured if he was captured and still alive.”

Soon after he learned that his father was shot down and missing, Bruce volunteered to go over to Vietnam.

“I wanted to go to continue his fight for his country,” he said.

But the Marines wouldn’t let him go because he had a family member listed as MIA.

“Had he been declared killed in action, they would have let me go,” Bruce said. “It was very much a setback. It was very disappointing to me.”

Very early in his Air Force career, Sergeant Holmes also tried to go to Vietnam, “for revenge.” But he didn’t make it either.

Tommy, who toward the end of the Vietnam War joined the Army, is the only one of the brothers who didn’t volunteer to go to Vietnam.

“We were at war; dad was at war,” Tommy said. “He was doing something for our country. He never questioned the war, and neither did I. But I didn’t opt to go to Vietnam. My mother could never have handled that.”

On April 1, 1973, the Holmes family sat glued to the TV as they watched the last of the 591 American POWs arrive home as part of Operation Homecoming. When the last American POW from Vietnam, Army Capt. Robert White, stepped off the plane, the Holmes family’s roller coaster ride of emotions started again.

“We watched every single one of them come off the plane — hoping to see my dad,” Sergeant Holmes said. “But we never did.”

Two years later, in a document to the family, the DOD changed Colonel Holmes’ official status from MIA to killed in action.

“All of a sudden in 1975, they changed his status to killed in action. That felt like a slap in the face to us,” Sergeant Holmes said. “All through the years, we felt lied to.”

But not everyone in the Holmes family believed the colonel was dead.

“Mom swore she recognized my dad’s nose in that picture of POWs,” Tommy said.” She died (in 1986) thinking he was still alive. I took her to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. It was very difficult for her; me, too. We found his name and took a picture of it with our reflection in the picture. My mother’s name deserves to be on the Wall — the Vietnam War killed her, too.”

In 1991, a Defense Department MIA investigation team turned up Vietnamese witnesses to Colonel Holmes being shot down. But it wasn’t until 1998 that a team was able to speak directly to members of People’s Army of Vietnam’s Regiment 238, Division 341, the unit that shot down Colonel Holmes’ aircraft with a surface-to-air missile.

Several different reports of the incident were produced between 1991 and 1998. Because each one was based on witnesses’ recollections of events that had happened so long ago, the reports varied greatly. The information often was contradictory. Nevertheless, the Holmes family wanted to know everything they could.

“No matter how horrifying, I wanted to know every little detail of what happened to my dad,” Sergeant Holmes said. “Was he alive when he went down? Was he burned? Was he killed instantly when his airplane was hit? One of the reports talks about him — forgive me —being decapitated.”

Finally, after getting substantiated reports on the location of a possible crash site in

the Ke Thuy District, Quang Binh Province, a Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command team from Hickam AFB, Hawaii, discovered Colonel Holmes' remains July 31, 1999. At the site, team members found small bone fragments as well as a broken piece of eyeglasses. The team also discovered a variety of small pieces of personal belongings, engine parts that could have come from a "Bird Dog" aircraft and small arms ammunition.

Colonel Holmes' remains were repatriated Sept. 8, 1999, and sent to JPAC's Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam, where they were positively identified Nov. 25, 2003. However, the family wasn't eager to accept the DOD's findings.

"When I first saw the report, it really made me angry," Tommy said. "I told them, 'This is (expletive); this is not giving me the closure I need.' When I first saw the final report and saw the pictures, I thought, 'This ain't nothing at all.'"

That was before lab officials took Sergeant Holmes and Tommy around the lab and showed them the painstaking effort that went into the identification process.

"If I had not gone to Hawaii myself and seen the process they use to identify someone, I wouldn't have been convinced those were my dad's remains," Tommy said. "But now, I know it's my dad. And if this is all I'm going to get, fine."

After waiting nearly 40 years for an answer to the question of what happened to his father, Sergeant Holmes has finally found peace in his heart.

"In my own mind, I believe he was killed before he hit the ground," he said. "When he was hit, that is when he died. In my mind, he died the way he wanted — in his plane defending his country."

After the Holmes brothers accepted their dad's remains May 18, members of the sergeant's Reserve unit, the 36th APS, who were at Hickam doing their annual tour, ceremoniously marched them out to a hearse.

Tommy flew aboard a commercial airplane to Iowa the next day accompanying his dad's remains home for the funeral. Sergeant Holmes flew to Seattle and then on to Iowa.

Bruce elected to stay in Iowa and handle arrangements for the funeral. Even though he did not get to tour the lab, he accepted his brothers' assurance that they were, indeed, bringing their dad home.

"I had accepted a long time ago that dad was killed and was never coming back," Bruce said. "I think the plane disintegrated in the air when it was hit. I don't think he survived."

On the day of the funeral, local Girl Scouts lined Main Street in Nashua with American flags. The Holmes' cousins, Larry and Vick Sonne, drove Colonel Holmes' flag-draped coffin about 3 miles from the funeral home to the gravesite aboard a Belgian draft horse carriage. Sergeant Holmes sat next to Mr. Sonne on the carriage. Bruce, carrying an American flag, and Tommy, carrying a MIA/POW flag, rode in the back next to the coffin.

A line of more than 50 cars followed the carriage to the gravesite, which already had close to 100 people waiting.

The day before the funeral, Dale and Madelyn Sonne, cousins of the Holmes, recorded five inches of rain at their farm overnight from a number of storms that skirted

nearby tornadoes. The weather forecast for the day of the funeral called for heavy showers and more tornado watches.

However, that wasn't in the plans for Colonel Holmes' return. As the carriage traveled along the town's main street, the sky was clear and blue. As the services ended, clouds were gathering in the distance. Later that night, more tornadoes touched down around the area.

An honor guard from Offutt AFB, Neb., was on hand to provide full military honors. Four F-16s from the Iowa National Guard's 132nd Fighter Wing out of Des Moines flew a missing man formation.

A driving member of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, Tommy provided a loving and heartfelt 40-minute eulogy at his father's funeral, which he referred to as a homecoming.

"Today we add the final chapter," he said. "Your tour of duty is finally complete. You are home and home to stay."

(Sergeant McKay is assigned to the 446th AW public affairs office at McChord AFB.)

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